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The Southern Gothic in Carson McCullers' The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

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القوطية الجنوبية في رواية كارسون ماكولرز القلب صياد وحيد

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Abstract

Carson McCullers is an American author who demonstrated her artistic premise during the 1940s from an early age. She is mostly depicted as being interested in the closer realms of experience than in social affairs. She dwells upon the influences and consequences of regional problematic strata reflected in the Southern individual's suffering and alienation as a basic background to almost all her stories. As an initiator of the Southern Gothic literature, McCullers tends to construct a very distinctive framework of fiction, dealing mostly with the intrinsic horror of the personal that lie beyond the usual Gothic sense of public dreadfulness. Through meticulous analysis of McCullers's seminal novel, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter; the study explores McCullers' replenishment of the Southern Gothic and her endeavor to examine the residuals of the social and political predicaments implanted into the Southern individual's psyche.**Keywords:** Carson McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, the Southern Gothic and the individual dilemma.

الملخص:

أظهرت الروائية الامريكية كارسون ماكولرز فرضيتها الفنية خلال الأربعينيات من القرن العشرين منذ سن مبكرة موضحة اهتمامها الاساس بمجالات الخبرة المتعلقة بالشؤون الاجتماعية وتأثير الطبقات الإشكالية الإقليمية وانعكاساتها على معاناة الفرد الجنوبي الامريكي وعزلته كخلفية أساسية لجميع قصصها. باعتبارها البادئ في الأدب القوطي الجنوبي، تميل ماكولرز إلى بناء إطار خيالي مميز للغاية، يتعامل في الغالب مع الرعب الجوهري للشخصية او الفرد الجنوبي الذي يفوق الإحساس القوطي المعتاد الذي يهتم بالرعب العام. من خلال التحليل الدقيق لرواية ماكولرز، القلب صياد وحيد؛ تستكشف الدراسة تجديد ماكولرز للقوطية الجنوبية وسعيها لدراسة بقايا المآزق الاجتماعية والسياسية المزروعة في نفسية الفرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كارسون ماكولرز، القلب صياد وحيد، القوطية الجنوبية، و مأساة الفرد

1. Introduction

I am so immersed in my characters that their motives are my own. When I write about a thief, I become one.... I become the characters I write about, and I bless the Latin poet Terence who said: 'Nothing human is alien to me. – McCullers, The Mortgaged Heart Born in Georgia, McCullers (1917-1967), from an early age, investigates the most urgent problems that the Southern people have terribly undergone. She has always been much concerned with the personal and individual as a mirror reflecting the outer struggle. Harold Bloom states that Culler's artistic and life's credo is rooted in the words of the Latin poet Terence' who states that 'Nothing human is alien to me' (Bloom, 2009, p.1). McCullers becomes alienated from her peers due to her tomboyish style, introspective nature and struggle with several bouts of rheumatic, a matter that drove her artistic nature to have piano lessons as a means of expression of such alienation. But, she failed to continue her piano studies at Juilliard because of different hard times in the New York City. She compensates this loss, with the encouragement of her father, by taking writing classes that helped her to launch into the realm of literature. Nevertheless, her old love to music had always been the undercurrent that endowed her literary genius with "an architectural framework" (Folk, 2023, pp. 202, 204) rooted in the musical allusions which served as "an extended correlative," to speech her characters. Barbara Nauer Folk in her "The Sad Sweet Music in Carson McCullers," (2023) states that:It is this sad and tender vision of humanity which is central to Carson McCullers' writings: the race of men a grandiose chorus, a body in chains but nevertheless able to transcend itself in expression which is as variously tones, as painfully beautiful, as its own mysterious narrator (Folk, 2023, p. 202).In this respect, McCullers depicts her characters as being in a complete inner quest for a personal harmonious melody to govern one's entity in order to resort it safe from being kept distorted. She herself made of her literature a quest to find free expression herself.McCullers, with her interest in the individual rather than the social or political tended to show preference and association to a group of writers and critics who began writing during or shortly after WWII. The 1940s' 'new fiction' writers rejected the public experience, taking on more allegiance to the individual and personal domain of experience. They tended to liberate themselves from any so-called social obligations (Webster, 1960, p. 2). What matters for these writers is the scar dropped from the outside surrounding into the individual's inner self and started to swell urging him to articulate the resulting pain. To understand the reasons that motivated these writers to construct such literary allegiance, some reference to the historical and political issue that overwhelmed the American South of that era.Carson McCullers published her first novel The Heart is a Lonely Hunter in 1941, post the Great Depression and prior to World War II. The American South was still wreathing under the repressive relations between the Americans and African Americans; relations, which were regulated by Jim Crow laws that spanned from 1881 into the 1940s. What added most to the African-Americans' dilemma was that the influence of the depression was still hovering over the South, a matter that led to more tense relations among people (Webster, 1960, p. 2).In addition to the social crises, politically speaking, America was witnessing a transitory phase in its history, the post war and post-depression America hailed the individualistic ideology. America's capitalist democracy stood against the other major twentieth century ideologies as the collective communism. This change in the political ideology was further enhanced by the fall of the Marxist political theory with the break of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. The 1940s writers set themselves free from the ideological league of politics turning their quest for knowledge to be no more concerned with social or political affairs as much as it is to be rooted in a more sensible and individualistic introspective layer of literary investigation (Taher, 2009, pp. 146,147).

2. Regionalism and Southern Gothic Literature

No more able to write in global terms, the writers of the forties tended to reverse all the past formative norms in literary production, to create their own 'new type' of fiction. This 'new type' is rooted usually in the Deep South and its grotesque beauty. In "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing," (1950) McCullers states that

I hardly let characters speak unless they are Southern…. This is particularly true of Southern writers because it is not only their speech and the foliage, but their entire culture— which makes it a homeland within a homeland. No matter what the politics, the degree or non-degree of liberalism in a Southern writer, he is still bound to this particular regionalism of language and voices and foliage and memory. Few Southern writers are truly cosmopolitan (McCullers, "Flowering").In this respect, her writing is deepened by her regional, encompassing all its normal and grotesque attributes. But, as an initiator of the Southern Gothic literature, McCullers tends to construct a very distinctive framework of fiction.It is important in the first place to denote what Southern Gothic means. Different from the 18th Century Gothic genre initiated by Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley's stories, Southern Gothic tends to deal mostly with the intrinsic horror and strangeness of the personal that lie beyond the apparent sense of horror (Babuji, 2021, p. 4963).Though Southern Gothic tends to

have adopted from the Gothic genre, yet it evokes horror and fear through a most socially detestable themes and characters. This may be exemplified in handicapped, disabled, and impotent characters, revealing themes as homosexuality, violence siding with the theme of racial conflict, or demarcated identity (Glesson-White, 2003, p. 80). The setting of the Southern Gothic is not the gothic castles but, rather, the decayed downtown that is trodden by poverty and corruption. Another feature of the South Gothic is the depiction of society as an antagonist (Babuji, 2021, p. 4964)Following her interest in the regional setting and its people, McCullers tries to explore the individual conflicts and issues related to it, and the way these conflicts are considered as residuals of the social and political predicaments implanted into the individual's psyche. The very regional stance in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter lies in its grotesque Gothic nature that resembles Thomas Hardy's Egdon Heath, its prolongs heat of summer and its boring night creeps over its radiant day time. Within a similar atmosphere, McCullers paves the way to the de-familiarized posture for her characters, John Singer and Antonapoulos, Mick Kelly, and others.

3. The Impact of Russian Writers

In "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature," McCullers denotes that:Modern Southern writing seems rather to be most indebted to Russian literature, to be the progeny of the Russian realists. And this influence is not accidental. The circumstances under which Southern literature has been produced are strikingly like those under which the Russians functioned. In both old Russia and the South up to the present time a dominant characteristic was the cheapness of human life (p.252).The indifference by which the dominating social and political systems treats the trodden poor links the Southern American slavery to the Russian serfdom, though it was not referred to as slavery. Similar to the process of Slavery abolition, the Russian serfdom ended in Russia during the late 19th century, leaving behind the sharecroppers be “yielded little food or profit” (Edge, 2019, p. 3). Sharing a universal similarity McCullers declares that nearly all nations some sample of forced subjugation in their past. McCullers wrote:The South and old Russia have much in common sociologically. The South has always been a section apart from the rest of the United States, having interests and a personality distinctly its own. Economically and in other ways it has been used as a sort of colony to the rest of the nation. The poverty is unlike anything known in other parts of this country. In social structure there is a division of classes similar to that in old Russia. (McCullers 471 qtd. in Edge, 2019, p. 4)Being depicted in the writings of Chekov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, human toil has been portrayed with a sense of horror and fear that copes the gothic flavor of Southern fiction. In addition, the Russian writers were also connected to the Southern literature in its search for the Russian identity away from any social or local background (Edge, 2019, p. 6). Following these resemblances, the Russian realist writers stood as a source of inspiration for McCullers, endowing her with the most proper literary medium by which she articulates the predicament of trodden southerners.

4. Aspects of the Southern Gothic in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

The title of the novel is taken from the line "Deep in the heart of Summer, sweet is life to me still, /But my heart is a lonely hunter that hunts on a lonely hill." The poem is written by the Scottish poet William Sharp (1855-1905). The title is an instruction to the mainly grotesque themes of the novel; loneliness and isolation.

The story revolves around two mute characters, John Singer and Antonapoulos, who have been tied in a friendship for about ten years. They are marginalized by their disability from the whole of the townspeople. Singer so much concerned in supporting his friend who suffers from mental breaks. Their relation is based on a melody of love and care. Being put into a mental asylum by his cousin, Antonapoulos is taken away from Singer. This break in their relation necessitates Singer to break through new relation with his surroundings. Having learnt the American Sign Language and knowing how to write, Singer tends to start good relations. Yet, he feels alienated without having his friend around.Launching into the social life, Singer paves the way to the readers being acknowledged of the other characters in the novel. Each of the main characters surrounding Singer is having an inner alienation that keeps their own enclosed inner rooms. The first person to meet is Mick Kelly, a 13 year old adolescent who is trying to make the best of the world in which she lives. The other character is Biff, who is standing in his New York café with unstopped questioning. Biff shows a loving and sympathetic attitude to those who are considered freakish by the social norms, by welcoming them against the will of his wife, Alice. The third character to appear is the black American doctor Copeland. Copeland has struggled much to be a doctor to preserve hi black identity. He is denying any help to the whites. Yet, he was persuaded by Singer to help Jake Blount, a white drunken wanderer. Blount in his turn is a big-mouth when intoxicated by drinks, but in reality he is always a run-away. Being an anti-capitalist, Blount is always having harsh discussions with Dr. Copeland, who instructs that the reason behind man's conflict is racism.These

characters are all talking to Singer attempting to relieve their psychological tension that is caused by their need to be listened to. Ironically enough, Singer succeeds to be the only one, although mute and deaf, to understand the inner music these characters try to articulate. All of them find in Singer the light of love and care, but when it comes to Singer himself, no one caring enough to notice what he really suffers from. When after a year of Antonapoulos' entrapment in the asylum, Spring visits him with presents and food, but it seems that his friend has turned indifferent and cold. Antonapoulos' brain becomes duller and eventually at Singer's second visit Antonapoulos is dead John. Singer rides back to town and as he goes to work the next day, smokes a cigarette and shoots himself.

5. Gothic Elements in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

5.1. Xenophobia

One feature of the Southern Gothic is the arousing sense of fear that is evoked by no apparent cause. The sense of mistrust and fear is depicted to be overwhelming The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. Although the civil wars freed the black, but the South remained wreathing under the chains of the Whites' superiority. Consequently, there aroused in most of the southerners a complete refusal to become in the service of the whites, as it is apparent in the attitude of Dr. Copeland. This refusal is intensified, not only for the doctor, but also for other black southerners, by the crime carried out against the doctor's son Willie. The sheer violence by which Willie is treated by the white policemen in the interrogation room encourages that fear and refusal.The Whites as well as the African Americans witnessed an arousing sense of "Xenophobia,"(Babuji, 2021, p. 4965), a fear of the other. Yet, for the whites, this fear was much rooted in the reactionary attitude that may arise because of this incident. Such sense remained overwhelming the whole novel. This resulted in the characters' creation of their own private worlds to which they preferred to be confined.

5.2 The Southern Belle Vs. Cross Dressing

McCullers' characters are drawn to defy formatively the social interaction of which they are deprived either by their disability or their unwillingness. Part of this defiance is the denial to be identified to the very image of the Southern Belle. Mick refuses the socially celebrated hyper-feminine character, which the 1940s women saw as an obstacle in her development (Glesson-White, 2023, p. 69). Mick insists that she does not want to get married. Her liberated ideas about marriage and having the "tomboy" posture, makes her isolated from her peers The technique of cross-dressing is used by the author as part of her grotesque implementation. She tends to introduce cross-dressing to bring paradoxical emblems together for the sake of a unified superior purpose. Cross-dressing is moving from the purely physical manifestations presented through the way Mick Kelley is dressed to the more psychological, mental and somehow spiritual layers (Glesson-White, 2023, p. 70). The younger tomboy, Mick belongs to the Southern tradition who is described, as it is in the novel, as a “gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve . . . [who] was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes” (H 20)[1]. Seen through the eyes of Biff Brannon, Mick is no more than a boyMcCullers moves thoroughly from the physical to the more mental and psychological cross-dressing. For McCullers, the very desire for alternative mode of being is part of what Natalie Davis calls "cross-identity (Davis, p.131. qtd. in Glesson-White, 2023, p. 71). The contempt for normative practices is best articulated by Biff's vision at the close of the novel when he appears "suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith." (H 312). Such radiance can also be passed to the character Singer. The paradox created by Singer's deafness and his inability to communicate, and his sound ability to articulate love and understanding makes of him another example of cross-dressing (Glesson-White, 2023, p. 69). He is most readily concerned with listening to and understanding the inner music of pain of each one of other characters. This different role he undertakes and which is contrasting his being disabled make of him, for some critics as a Christ-like figure in his innate goodness and healing attitude (Folk, 2023, p. 208)The issue of Cross-dressing has been employed by McCullers in such a way that it serves her peculiar employment of the idea of the 'Southern Grotesque' as part of its Gothic flavor.

5.3. Homosexuality

Another side of McCullers' use of the Gothic is her presentation of the idea of homosexuality and heterosexuality. For many critics, the relation that binds the "two mutes," is suspected to be a homosexual relationship. Yet, no direct evidence in the text may allude to the idea. In the shadowy reference to homosexuality, McCullers is intended to depict a non-formative vision of the idea. Being different and alienated from the outer universe, Singer and Spiro Antonapoulos tended to enclose themselves within their own type of world, where they can achieve a better and non-aggressive type of communication. They tend to

reserve their "inner conscious"(Glesson-White, 2023, p. 50) untouched and non-approached. Many critics see that being impotent and disabled of communication makes them prone to bridge this communion by erotic relation, maintaining that being deprived of social enactments causes them some type of "withdrawal from sexual relations" (Budick, 1994, p. 151).For McCullers, homosexual relation is one kind of the narcissist nature of Singer. He sees in Antonapoulos a mirror to his own self. She maintains that narcissism rests on mirroring images, where the self is reflected back as it appears in the novel. In the situation where Singer writes and uses sign language with Antonapoulos, though he knows that Antonapoulos can neither read nor fully understands the sign language Singer uses, can stand as an evidence that in his inner thought Singer is looking at his mute friend as a reflection of his own self "(Glesson-White, 2023, p. 59). When Antonapoulos dies, Singer metamorphoses himself into another version of his friend. In his suicide, Singer is urging himself to a complete unity with his friend because after being acknowledged of Antonapoulos' death, Singer finds that "[t]his kaleidoscopic variety of scene . . . seemed somehow connected with his friend. His thoughts were with Antonapoulos. The bliss of their reunion almost stirred him" (H 282)In The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, part of McCullers' contribution to the Southern Gothic fiction seems to be rooted in her rather complex depiction of homosexuality. This is portrayed as an "odd" desire outside the prototypical heterosexual sociably accepted desire. The desire McCullers depicts is troubling and seems grotesque, not because she believes it as being unnatural, but because it is drawn as being shattering, expansive and thus truly grotesque" (Glesson-White, 2023, p. 60). The suicidal self-extension approached by Singer is in itself part of this grotesque reunion.

6. The Interplay Between Techniques and the Thematic Domain

6.1 Narration

McCullers employs a diversity of technique that nevertheless fused together to build up the thematic domain of the narrative. She centers her novel on the lives of five central characters, all suffering of isolation and loneliness. Using five characters as the main personae in her novel is intended to represent human society in general. The characters stand for various social, sexual and racial positions (Bloom, 2009, p. 121 In his "Approaching Community in Carson McCullers's The Heart is a Lonely Hunter," (2004) Jennifer Murra, states that although the story of John Singer and his mute friend is simple, the poetic vision that McCullers portrays comes to existence due to the symbolic representation of characters, structure and the narrative voice (Bloom, 2009, p. 118). Each one of the characters is fully exposed through the employment of the third- person narrator who is employed as a device to unify the novel. Nevertheless, through the released unspecified temporal and spatial dimension of the novel, McCullers retain a slight distance that leaves some space for outside voices to participate in the narrative (Bloom, 2009, p. 118). The narrator in the novel does not support the readers with any philosophy or perspective, serving only as an agent to expose the characters to the readers (Bloom, 2009, p. 124), a matter that paves the way for the reader to empathy.

6.2 Language, Symbols and Characterization

As part of the grotesque depiction by which McCullers defines her own print in the Southern Gothic is the language by which her freakish characters communicate**.** The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is well attributed by the lack of communication. Even for the characters that have the physical predispositions for communication, they lack the willingness to it. Russell (2011) argues that…the alienating values of the modern social world have a deforming effect on the body and, in the proliferation of words as commodities or commercials, can make language unreliable as well. From misleading newspaper accounts to strobing neon signs, language and the body perform mutually grotesque acts. (p. 67)The very usage of language seems grotesque for Russell, let alone the absence of the ability to use language. In The Heart, the bodily performance turns to be freakish and passionate as it is done by a character who is physically disabled in the first place. Yet, what makes Singer's freakish signs be considered grotesque evoking an uncomfortable feeling is that we know that it is his only way of escorting his inner pains and conflict. The very absence of language is made by Singer the only song, by which he communicates his thought. For almost all the characters in the novel, communication is more readily to be difficult if not completely absent, a matter that in its own respects enlarges the character's sense of alienation.

6.3 Music and Love Imagery

McCullers endows The Heart is a Lonely Hunter with a symbolic layer that suits the inner worlds of the character. It lies in the symbolic presentation of love and music being ties most properly to the character of Singer. All the characters in the story are driven to Singer for he is standing for the value of love and solidarity. Singer, whose name is ironically proposed, could become the singer who sings out the inner music of the

characters. He stands as a symbol for a profound acknowledgement of love and understanding.Music imagery is overwhelming the scenes of the novel. Whether played in the 'inner room' as it appears with Mick Kelley, or played out through the power of love and understanding, music imagery has been employed by the writer to overcome the frustrations the characters have throughout their daily life. Singer's tongueless sympathy creates a certain type of melody by which integrates the characters.

Conclusion

The individual interior realms have always been the core of interest for Carson McCullers, which she depicted in her writings. McCullers has painted the personal psychological layers of man's experiences in her discussion of the Southern Gothic. She dwells upon different layers of the meaning of gothic that stands somehow aloof from the horrifying connotation of the word. The fears related to the Southern Gothic are mostly residing in the personal sense of alienation and loneliness, a loneliness, which results from the personal search for an inner balance and equilibrium. For this mission, McCullers tended to use an extended correlative that relates the human psyche to the notes of musical concert where music can only become tender when harmony resides between man and his universe. Throughout her novel, The Heart is the Lonely Hunter, she uses of different environmental, social and political elements of the American South to contrive a new frame of the Southern Gothic that is different from the traditional overtaking of this subject. For McCullers, the Southern Gothic grotesque tended to be built on a more psychological and personal bases than the wider social frame.

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هوامش البحث

[1] Carson McCullers. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd. 1943. All subsequent references to the novel within the context of the paper is to this edition and will be abbreviated as (*H and* page number)

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